

The Wild Kind

Swift water, rocky cliffs and a canoe ride that ends with a beer and a burger. It's a weekend wilderness hoe-down in east-central Iowa.

DNR Park Ranger Jim Hansen climbs one of three major walls at Palisades-Kepler State Park that attract several hundred climbers a year. Most take advantage of a short hike up top to fix their ropes before the climb, others test skills bouldering—a short ropeless climb on a small difficult section of rock.

OPPOSITE: Dave Patton of the University of Iowa Recreation Services climbs a steep face. **FAR RIGHT:** Ranger Jim Hansen disassembles a makeshift fire pit to leave no trace of human activity in the Palisades-Dows State Preserve. "People get lost out here. No trails. No facilities. Not even a good public access make the landscape so much different than rest of Iowa. Almost no one comes here. It's rare to even find a soda or beer can," he says. Huge virgin white and red oaks hug its rugged terrain, offering herons a rookery. "Some years I've seen up to 40 big, stick built heron nests in the tree tops."



“In a way, there are two kinds of parks,” begins Jim Hansen, park ranger for Palisades-Kepler State Park in east-central Iowa. He sits forward in his beat-up Naugahyde chair at the Sutliff Bar, a dollar-bills-on-the-ceiling kind of joint, where Johnny Cash plays on the jukebox, and bait and tackle is sold at the cash register.

“There’s Lake Macbride, more of a recreational boating place where you can go to the beach, go fishing. Great park.”

Hansen pauses, takes a bite out of his pork tenderloin—grilled, not fried. He’s a compact guy, trim and springy, built like a high-school wrestler in the lightweight division. If Hansen’s not smiling (which he usually is, unless you’re making noise in his park after 10 p.m.), you get the picture from his bright blue eyes that a smile isn’t too long in coming.

“A park like Palisades is more for people who are going to get out and hike on the trails and who love that densely wooded forest. There aren’t many parks where you can rock climb, either. Palisades is the main one.”

Hansen sits back, takes another bite, satisfied. You can tell when a ranger loves his park. And Sutliff Bar is a good place

for woodsy philosophizing, especially at the end of a long paddle on the Cedar River that runs just outside its doors.

Talk turns to this smart little patch of Iowa, smack in-between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. Sandy beaches. Giant telescopes in a hidden observatory. Soaring cliffs above a swift river. Ancient hardwood forest where you’d better pack your GPS or end up the subject of the next Jon Krakauer novel.

“It’s a little bit of everything, really,” Hansen concludes. “It’s a unique landscape within what Iowa is.”

UP, UP, UP

Established in 1922, the 840 acres of Palisades-Kepler State Park is packed with well-preserved relics—follow the four-mile Cedar Cliff Trail and you’ll catch the drift. Limestone structures by the Civilian Conservation Corps look like they could’ve been built last month. Kids sift through the sand at the beach for old shells and fossils. A few remaining eastern red cedars date back 500 years. Campsites and cabins are enfolded in old growth.

Cliffs formed in ancient times also make Palisades-Kepler a rock-climbing park. Hansen and his crew help keep

LEFT: Jim Hoff of Des Moines tests his skill against walls up to 70 feet high. "As you go up the rock wall, you feel like you are free climbing. When you lose your grip or can't hold on, it is a scary situation, but in reality you are connected to the rope and safe," says Ranger Jim Hansen. Climbers are rewarded with a rapel from the top.

RIGHT: 1) Stiff, grip-like toes and soles make climbing shoes a bonus. 2) Park trails, campgrounds and shelters are family magnets. 3) With a hand from Ranger Hansen, Dylan Smith makes his first climb hours before his fourth birthday. "He could not stop talking about it. He felt like a big guy," says his mother, Julia Smith of Cedar Rapids. 4&5) Dollar bills on the ceiling and an Old West exterior exude character at the Sutliff Bar along the Cedar River.



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the sport safe and accessible for climbers who sign waivers at the ranger's office. Climbers generally start out at a gym, then graduate to outdoor ascents at places like Raccoon Cove along a steep rock face on the Cedar Cliff Trail.

Dave Patton, assistant director of the University of Iowa Recreation Services, gives a harness talk to a group of novices. His *Touch the Earth* outfitter within the University of Iowa periodically offers trips to the general public during the September-November climbing season.

Patton begins the series of commands that structure every ascent:

"On belay."

"Belay on."

"Climbing."

"Climb on."

Patton says that Palisades holds the majority of Iowa's

climbing history. "Royal Robbins climbed here," he says of the early pioneer of American climbing.

Skittering upward, hands dancing about for a solid hold, his students find this rock a muscle-draining challenge. It's just another surprise about this area that makes it such a solid bet for a visit.

FAST WATER

Patton's *Touch the Earth* also rents kayaks and canoes—handy for the Cedar River. It's about 10 feet deep, a wide and fast run. You'll start downriver from a wrecked dam at the park, then paddle a few hours to Sutliff Access, where, conveniently, you'll take out at the Sutliff Bar, established in 1899 adjacent the old iron Sutliff Bridge.

As a canoe pulls up, a waitress leans out the back door and yells, "Blake! Your food is ready!" to one of the folks

LOST IN IOWA

Hikers at Palisades-Kepler State Park take in the view along the Cedar River. Hundreds of yards of sand bar beaches sprawl just downstream. Due to strong currents, beachgoers should stay on the sand.

Across river is the remote and rugged Palisades-Dows State Preserve. Shown between the hikers and obscured by high water is a 1930s-era dam, now broken in portions. Paddlers should portage around the dam for safety to avoid strong current and underwater obstructions.







1) Downriver of Palisades-Kepler park is the Sutliff Bridge, where patrons of the adjacent bar and eatery can enjoy a burger on the bridge while fishing or after a paddle. 2) 3&4) Paddlers Max Meyer of Marion (green kayak) and Marty Colbert of Cedar Rapids hit the rapids below a broken section of the 1930s-era dam at Palisades-Kepler. "It's a good whitewater section, but people need to be experienced kayakers skilled with specialty whitewater kayaks," says park ranger Jim Hansen, who notes paddlers should portage around the dam for safety. 5&6) Katie Slauson, 10, of Swisher peers through one of several high-end telescopes at the Palisades-Dows Observatory on the southeast edge of Palisades-Kepler State Park. Public viewing nights allow guests to peek through 16- and 24-inch telescopes. Within the park, campers can also "have some pretty interesting experiences looking at the sky with the naked eye or with binoculars," says Hansen. "There are nights here so dark, you can't see a hand in front of your face."



chatting at nearby picnic tables.

There's a lazy, happy feeling here. People in these parts have a good thing going, and they know it. Travelers straggle in the door every now and then, exchanging that knowing look between comrades who make a good find on vacation.

MEETING THE HEAVENS

It's with a different sense of wonder—but just as powerful—that visitors stumble upon the Eastern Iowa Observatory and Learning Center, just far enough away from the little shops and restaurants of Mount Vernon to afford a near-perfect darkness. From the observatory parking lot, tiny red squares burn in the distance—easy-on-the-eye red lights within the observatory domes.

In those buildings, telescopes reveal the night sky to the Cedar Amateur Astronomers who built this place—and

the visitors they welcome regularly. While navigating the down-lit sidewalk, you can hear gentle shifting all around as stargazers peer through their telescopes set up on concrete observing pads. The night sky is splayed with bursts of stars like pinholes in a dark canvas.

Inside the observatory, the roof rolls away to expose the sky. There's a fresh freedom in that outer layer of earthly protection peeling back to reveal a heavenly reward. Among the three buildings are five telescopes, including a six-inch refractor like the one Galileo used.

In 2003, when the University of Iowa retired its onsite observatory because its city sky became too bright, it donated a 24-inch Boller & Chivens telescope to the Cedar Amateur Astronomers—kind of like having the NBA's LeBron James play for your Tuesday-night pickup team.

Member Jerry Warner peeks through a telescope



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PRESERVE THE NIGHT SKY

Keeping the sky dark is essential for stargazing now and in the future. In general, to reduce light pollution, light only what needs lit, when it needs lit. More tips:

- Get rid of the dusk-to-dawn security light. Use a motion-sensitive light instead, if you need a nighttime security system.
- For exterior lighting, purchase fixtures that shine directly downward (also called full cutoff fixtures). For existing fixtures, consider light shades (www.starrynightlights.com).
- Reduce the night glow at home. Minimize wattage and direct illumination toward the ground. For apartments, talk to your manager about using blackout blinds at night. Put household lights on dimmer switches.
- Turn lights off when you leave the office.
- If you see a billboard or commercial establishment with excessive lighting, or lights directed skyward, let them know you've noticed. It's confusing to migrating birds and pollutes the night sky.
- Write or e-mail your city councilperson, and request that future street illumination purchases be high-efficiency, low-energy, flat-lens streetlights.
- Get used to the dark. Human eyes have good night vision. Do you really need to turn on the light to take out the trash?
- Talk to friends and neighbors. This is one environmental pollution that's easily cleaned up without lasting side effects.

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and talks about the group's good fortune. "There is nothing like this in Missouri. There is nothing like this in Nebraska. This place is unique," he says. "What we have is very special."

The observatory is sited on the edge of Palisades-Dows State Preserve. There's no obvious public access to this wild place, no groomed trails. Those who venture in from the observatory grounds had better have a good map and know how to use it.

Dr. Neil Bernstein, a biology professor at Mt. Mercy College in Cedar Rapids, knows these woods because they are his classroom. He says wildflowers explode along the steep valleys of its 160 acres every spring—cutleaf toothwort, spring beauties, bloodroot. Neotropical migrants such as warblers find shelter here.

"In spring," says Bernstein, working his way through

the scrub, "it's a magnificent awakening."

A young boy visiting the observatory walks the outskirts of the preserve. He stops, his face frozen in the awe of a city kid who isn't used to this backwoods stuff. "This must be a jungle," he concludes.

Bernstein passes him, white work shirt rolled to his elbows and khakis covering his battered boots. The binoculars and red fanny pack mark him as a nature geek, a hiker who stops to muse over the loveliness of nodding trilliums, peer at a titmouse through binoculars, or to note that the mossy dolomite cliffs are calcareous rock—a buildup of marine invertebrate exoskeletons left over from the ancient Iowa sea.

"That's why this is a preserve," says Bernstein, referring to the boy. "So the children can make that realization. For students, where else could they have a



natural classroom like this?”

Bernstein points out beaver tracks and debates with Jim Hansen over what may or may not be bobcat scratchings on a tree. For Hansen, who oversees this area in conjunction with the Linn County Conservation Board, the preserve is just another reason he likes his job.

Hansen stands at the edge of a dolomite shelf, overlooking the green tangle of wilderness. Tiny sunfish and bluegill flit in a stream rolling toward the Cedar. Wild ginger cascades past all manner of ferns to a cluster of spindly blue beech trees. An aster hangs from a rocky outcropping, and a giant snail slides across a patch of moss. Nuthatches beep.

“I wish I had a lawn chair, a cooler of water, and a sandwich,” Hansen says. “I could watch this place all day.”

And then he sits, taking it all in, ready to talk woodsy philosophy again, which seems to come naturally in this exceptional little pocket of Linn County.

TRAVEL NOTES

PALISADES-KEPLER STATE PARK. 700 Kepler Dr., Mount Vernon, 52314. Forty-four campsites, 26 with electrical hookups. Family cabins. 319-895-6039; www.reserveiaparks.com

SLEEP INN & SUITES. This new building is part of a chain, yes, but it proudly displays local art for sale, keeps the breakfast room in tip-top shape, and boasts the all-important swimming pool for traveling families. From \$95 for doubles. 310 Virgil Ave., Mount Vernon. 319-895-0055; www.choicehotels.com

FOOD

LINCOLN CAFÉ. Chef and owner Matt Steigerwald changes

this menu weekly, based on freshness and availability of local and regional produce. Seasonally, you might find cocoa-rubbed Iowa elk or a good ole Niman Ranch Iowa pork chop. So good, you’ll probably want to buy the t-shirt. 117 First St. W., Mount Vernon. 319-895-4041; www.foodisimportant.com.

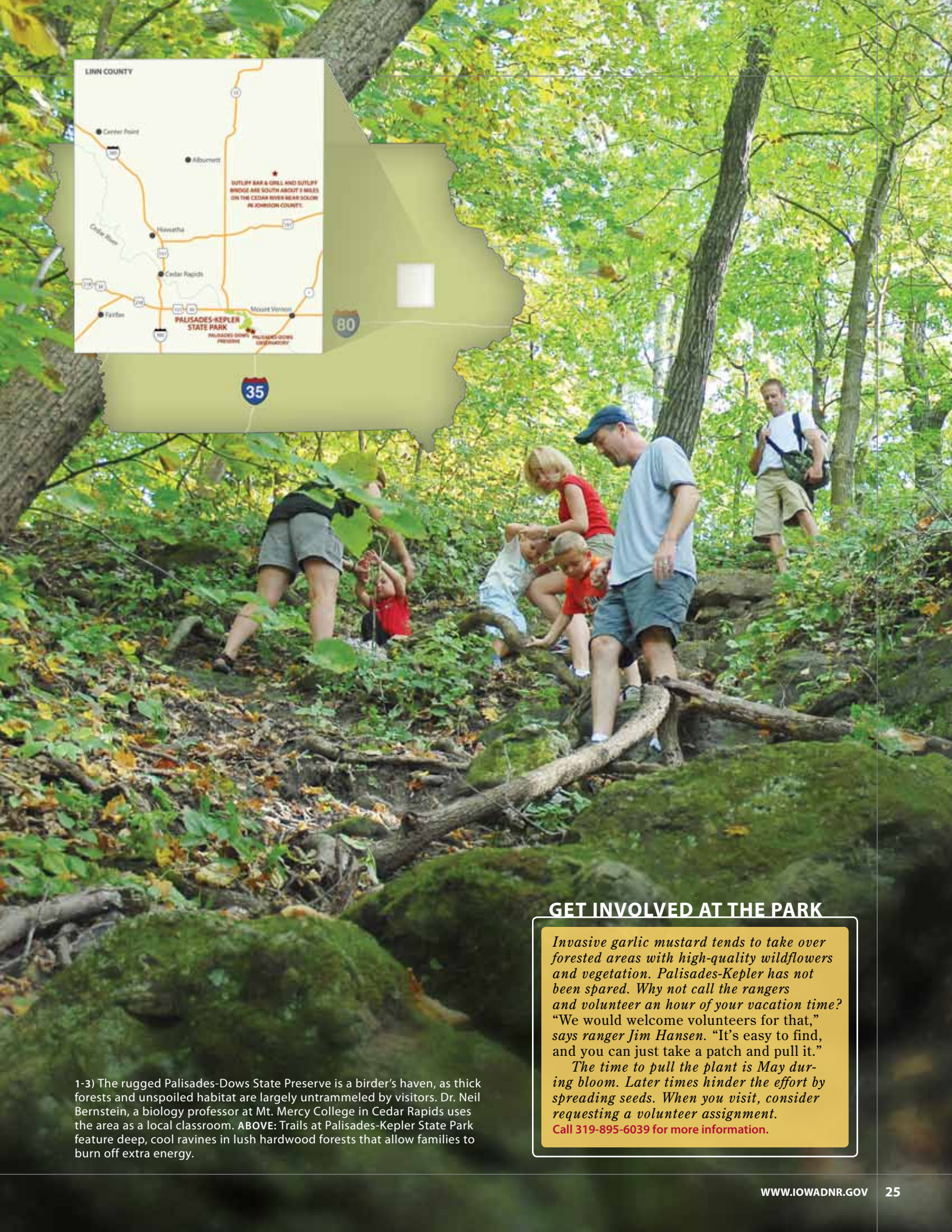
BAXA’S SUTLIFF STORE & TAVERN, 5546 130th St. NE, Lisbon. 319-624-2204; www.sutliffbridge.com.

GWEN’S FAMILY RESTAURANT. A bacon-and-eggs brand hole-in-the-wall on Main Street in Lisbon. 319-455-2873.

ACTIVITIES

PALISADES-DOWS OBSERVATORY. 1365 Ivanhoe Rd., approximately 15 miles southeast of Cedar Rapids and approximately 20 miles north of Iowa City/Coralville. Monthly public meetings are held for those interested in learning more about astronomy and telescopes, and for people who just wonder what it’s like to look through a high-quality telescope. Anyone can become a member, too. See the website for a map. www.cedar-astronomers.org.

TOUCH THE EARTH. Oversees the lifetime skills classes at the University of Iowa, plus the Climbing Gym located in the Field House and a non-credit trip program. The Touch the Earth Outdoor Rental Center is 3,500 square feet of tents, sleeping bags, kayaks and lots of other great gear to create your own adventure. It is part of the Hawkeye Tennis and Recreation Complex located off Prairie Meadow Drive in Iowa City, west of the Hall of Fame, east of Hawkeye Storage Lots and north of Hawkeye Drive apartments. 319-335-9293; www.recserv.uiowa.edu/programs/TTE/index.html.



1-3) The rugged Palisades-Dows State Preserve is a birder's haven, as thick forests and unspoiled habitat are largely untrammelled by visitors. Dr. Neil Bernstein, a biology professor at Mt. Mercy College in Cedar Rapids uses the area as a local classroom. ABOVE: Trails at Palisades-Kepler State Park feature deep, cool ravines in lush hardwood forests that allow families to burn off extra energy.

GET INVOLVED AT THE PARK

Invasive garlic mustard tends to take over forested areas with high-quality wildflowers and vegetation. Palisades-Kepler has not been spared. Why not call the rangers and volunteer an hour of your vacation time? "We would welcome volunteers for that," says ranger Jim Hansen. "It's easy to find, and you can just take a patch and pull it."

The time to pull the plant is May during bloom. Later times hinder the effort by spreading seeds. When you visit, consider requesting a volunteer assignment.

Call 319-895-6039 for more information.